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ABSTRACT

An interdisciplinary futures program was established as part of the core curriculum at Davis and Elkins College to prepare students for the variety of personal and social changes they are likely to experience during their lifetimes. Courses in the program are taught sequentially during each of the undergraduate years. At the freshmen, sophomore, and junior levels, students are introduced to collective and personal freedom, world cultures and lifestyles and the problem of ethnocentrism, and the major ideas that have shaped the modern Western mind. The last course of the sequence, taught during the senior year, requires students to forecast their own lives based upon information about the future, methods of choosing from alternatives, and an understanding of the forces of change. Classes are led by a team of instructors from disparate academic disciplines, using a variety of instructional methods, including lectures, discussion, games and simulation. The program is administered by a separate Integrated Studies department with its own head who oversees selection and development of core faculty, budgeting, and scheduling. In addition to helping students come to grips with the challenges and problems posed by the future, the futures program has enhanced the professional development of faculty and has increased the acceptance of the interdisciplinary approach within the college community. (JP)

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Armed with Alternatives:

A Future Oriented Program for a Liberal Arts College

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Paper presented at the First Global Conference on the Future

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ARMED WITH ALTERNATIVES:
A FUTURE ORIENTED PROGRAM FOR A LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE

(Presented at the First Global Conference on the Future, July 22, 1980)

One who forecasts the future may be fooled, but certainly, one who ignores the future is a fool, for past, present, and future reality is a social construction. The ability to recognize the constraints of the past and the present and to anticipate the avenues of alternatives in the future may be the key to a less disruptive social change. Whatever the desirable outcome, it is imperative that educational institutions include in their curriculum required future courses. Many colleges and universities now do have a future program lodged in one or more discipline area. Often uneven in quality, they are offered as an elective and frequently presented through the initiative of a single enthusiast rather than supported by the institution as a whole. Content of such courses are generally discipline oriented than embracing the student's understanding of self and society in a rapidly altered world community. These institutions can be pleased that a future program has found a place in the academy's curriculum, but a future program with more clearly defined pedagogical skills and techniques would of necessity raise a future course to a higher order of concern in an institution's commitment to its students.

In 1971 Davis & Elkins College, Elkins, West Virginia, grappled with this concern and other closely related curriculum issues in a year long institutional self-study. Early on in faculty deliberations they recognized the need of a central sequential core program as a foundation on which students could build awareness and self-concepts that would arm them with alternative ways of thinking and acting that have a chance of realization. In that same year the Integrated Sequence courses were inaugurated. At the freshman level all students are introduced to the issue of collective and personal freedom in

IGS 100: Human Freedom & the Counterforces. As sophomores they enroll in IGS 211: World Cultures, a program that increases their awareness of other world customs and lifestyles and sensitizes them to the limiting aspects of ethnocentrism. In their junior year students are required to enroll in IGS 251: Comparative Ideas, a course focused on major ideas which have significantly shaped the mocern Western mind. Thus by the students' senior year there has been a unified intellectual experience, a foundation on which they can base their world perceptions and build a program of actions suitable to their individual lifestyle.

At the senior level, IGS 300: The Future, the fourth sequential core, students engage in a course designed to unify their intellectual and personal experiences into an awareness of the opportunities, alternatives, and challenges from which they may imaginatively and seriously forecast their own life. Armed with substantive information about the future, with methods of choosing alternatives, and with an awareness and understanding of the forces of change, students can intelligently take control of those life patterns that have an impact on the quality of their life. They need not blindly fear or be confused about the future. They need not reject out-of-hand rapid social changes that are alien or counter to their value beliefs; rather the understanding and ability to either endorse or oppose the forces of change is enhanced. They need not be defeated by changing work skills in the market place or frightened by shifting world political and economic conditions. Rather they should be able to adjust and adopt their immediate pragmatic interests in light of perceived shifts and trends. Sensitized to alternatives in thought and ethical concepts, work patterns, personal life styles, technological and environmental issues, their personal future may be seen as one in

which they have an opportunity for rational input as they have consciously designed it. They are armed with some skills to imagine new alternatives and with the knowledge that the alternatives are the result, in part, from human choice.

A futures program exposes students to a core of knowledge which will enable them to explore and accommodate the variety of personal and social changes they will encounter in their immediate and long range future. Moreover students are not caught in a steady-state same-as-usual philosophy rather they are prepared to engage in risks with a high degree of self assurance.

It is worthwhile to quote a key paragraph from the 1979 Report to Club of Rome, No Limits to Learning: Bridging the Human Gap which nicely distinquishes between maintenance learning which has characterized most of formal higher education and innovative learning which is characterized by anticipation and participation.

> Anticipatory learning prepares people to use techniques such as forecasting, simulations, scenarios, and models. It encourages them to consider trends, to make plans, to evaluate future consequences and possible injurious side-effects of present decisions, and to recognize the global implications of local, national, and regional actions. Its aim is to shield society from the trauma of learning by shock. It emphasizes the future tense, not just the past. It employs imagination but is based on hard fact. . . . The essence of anticipation lies in selecting desirable events and working toward them; in averting unwanted or potentially catastrophic learning, the future may enter our lives as a friend, not as a burglar.

In short, the Davis and Elkins College future program assists students in innovative learning by anticipation and participation in the process of designing their own future.

Such a course, by its nature, places considerable emphasis on value recognition and the clash of values between class members and how value conflicts in an altering global society might be resolved with the least

disruption to the total society or to segments of a given singular society. Choices are discovered, alternatives are perceived, decisions are debated, convictions are challenged as students realize that their is an on-going synthesis of their formal education and their informal work and study experiences. Students can witness palpable solutions and opposition to ideological assumptions and practices. One might ask if the program is idealistic and unrealistic?

It would be fool hardy to assert that every student in the program secured a firm and sure grasp of all the concepts and issues introduced. What can be stated with conviction is that the College provides the opportunity and formal instruction for students to engage in a more through command of their own life from the alternatives presented.

How is the Davis and Elkins College future program organized, administrated, and taught? Lodged in a separate and innovative academic Division VI - Integrated Studies with its own head who exercises oversight over selection and development of core faculty, budget, scheduling and resources, the "Future" is one of four sequential and central core courses required of all students at their respective class level. Faculty who teach in the Future program are invited from disparate academic disciplines. Care is exercised so that the faculty represent interdisciplinary approaches to the course content, each bringing his/her own expertise and insight. Thus, a geologist may represent the sciences, an historian represents the historical context of identified issues, a political scientist can explain how the political process can facilitate or obstruct change, and an English professor may introduce humanistic concerns; yet all function from a common premise--to teach in a new dimension with their discipline skills as a backdrop and resource. Changes in staff

occur as required by the total institutional needs. The staff, once identified and selected, operate under a course captain who conducts an annual summer workshop, weekly staff meetings, orders library and course material, extends invitations to guest speakers, and organizes the agreed upon yearly course syllabus.

No faculty member in the Future program develops his/her own syllabus and executes the course as desired. Course content and teaching is team-taught. Divergent and contrary ideas are not dissuaded, rather they are encouraged among the faculty and openly debated in the classroom so that students may benefit and become involved in the clash of ideas. Operating from specifically stated goals and objectives faculty introduce these into the course at pre-determined locations. It has been discovered that there is a pacing and appropriate course rhythm for introduction of certain material. Team-teaching is not always the mode. Occasions arise where concentrated discussion/lecture by the individual faculty serves the course best. A degree of excitement and freshness pervades in the classroom because the faculty is judged not only by students but also by his peers. Yet the subject matter generates the highest excitement for the material is directly relevant to the students' lives. Openly in the classroom, dining room, dormitories, and elsewhere students debate the merits of an introduced objective or the appropriate course of action to bring about change. They are relating specific forecasts to their own work and leisure lifestyles, to their own value structure, to the realization that alternative strategies do exist for planning their own future individual goals and those of society.

Although lectures are a part of the instructional mode they serve generally as introductory presentations. At this stage of the students' educational

development stress is placed on active participation rather than passive acceptance of information. Because there are no answers to the issues of the future students are directed into debate, strategy planning, and forecasts of future conditions in an imaginative fashion. Game playing, scenario building, simulations, analytical thinking, all of which stimulate viable decision making that becomes a valuable skill for determining optimum optimum options. The students are provoked into challenging assumed postulates, altering value concepts, testing the viability of decisions made collectively and individually.

The future program in its entity becomes a testing arena of each student's understanding of self, his world and others, as well as recognizing the flexibility of his responses to changing local and global conditions. Formal testing of student's growth is conducted in various ways: through prepared position papers on an issued selected by the student in panel presentations before his peers; through a carefully thought-out personal relevance tree scenario projecting self, by stages, in the next thirty years of his/her life, touching on work/career plans, marriage, living conditions, religious practice and belief, examination of personal habits, likes and dislikes, economic and political values and what steps might be undertaken if one or several of desired goals were blocked or altered prior to fulfillment; through a detailed trend analysis; through interviews with faculty; and through other exercises that demonstrate acquisition and thoughtful understanding of the course's objectices. A grasp of the link between individual action and societal action in response to a stated issue of wide public concern is an objective that assists students in understanding why public response (at least in a domocratic society) often lags far behind individual concern.

Typically, a joint class or single class meeting meets for one two-hour

session on one day and for one one-hour session the following day. This arrangement provides for fuller discussion, presentation of sixty minute films followed by an examination of issues in the film, completion of game exercises, and in effect follow-up on what has been presented. Flexibility is allowed in this time-frame construct. The one-hour class session allows for continued discussion in a smaller class context, writing of assigned papers, and/or student/faculty interplay with ideas.

One might speculate about the total core program or even the future program itself as bringing about a fragmentization of the faculty, a lessening of their discipline expertise, and focusing attention away from a sense of professional growth. Quite the reverse has occurred. Visibility of professors is enhanced, professionals come to know their colleagues better and in a different context, and interdisciplinary development gains wider acceptance. New ideas about teaching and subject matter are generated. Grant proposals emerged from faculty who were dealing with subject matters outside of their field of specialization. And they found the proposals being funded. The individual educational backgrounds and talents of the core faculty was tapped, facilitating growth for the faculty and the institution.

Faculty began to attend regional and national conventions to learn more, faculty began to read professional papers and published articles about their work and again outside of their trained discipline area. A sense of experimentation, a richness of energies and fresh attitudes strengthened the faculty. Unused talents flourished and cooperation rippled into other academic areas. Faculty, not initially pleased with the core programs were eventually attracted to the spirit and interchange of their colleagues and then sought entry into a course that matched their interests. The soundness of the decisions made in

1971 has borne fruit. To imply that the growth process has been easy and without some hard and straight forward re-thinking would be wrong. But in the process of reexamining basic assumptions and policies a clearer and sharper understanding of what innovation means has emerged. An academic curriculum shake-up need not destroy faculty morale or destroy traditional subject in a liberal arts college. Rather it can re-shape in significant ways the curriculum so that dullness and repetition and routine are banished to the dustbin. With administrative support and the identification of vital active faculty members, the transformation can take place.

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